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The South India CHURCHMAN

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APRIL 1992

HE IS RISEN INDEED



The Vicarious Suffering



Church is called to be a suffering church—it suffers for others. It is a vicarious suffering. Jesus never wanted his followers be immuned from suffering. On the other hand he asked his followers to take the cross and follow him. What was his destination? The Calvary, the Death ; Death which gives life to the others. Jesus lived in the midst of suffering but it was not a problem for him. He denied that the crown of life was pleasure. He recognised that such 'suffering' was necessary to the fulfilment of his redeeming vocation. Thereby he identified himself with the suffering lot of the world. He suffered exceedingly but made no moan. When he set his face towards Jerusalem, he set himself on the 'narrow path' which was full of sorrow and agony.

This was the way which Jesus showed to his disciples. The disciples, initially, were very reluctant to follow Jesus' way, because they were cherishing their own whims and fancies. They thought of the kingdom and sought high positions. Some of them even went to the extent of correcting their master about the concept of the kingdom. They did not understand the meaning of suffering. A few hours before the arrest of Jesus, Peter had boasted to Jesus, 'Even if all fall away, I will not,' thinking it was that easy to suffer along with Jesus. The Lord responded by telling Peter he would deny Him three times before the cock crowed. But Peter boasted more vociferously, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you'. In a matter of hours Peter let the accusation of a little

servant girl frighten him into denying Jesus with a curse. When the cock crowed Peter remembered what Jesus had said and he went out and wept bitterly. That was the beginning of real manhood for Peter. This had been built into him at birth but it needed to be discovered, needed to be released from the false pride under which it was buried. Now he began to see his weakness, his pride and his false strength. True greatness comes by the road of brokenness and suffering. No man is really great who has not been broken before God. Peter learned to depend completely on God and follow the narrow, suffering path. He humbled himself before God and bowed to the reign and rule of God in his life. We are in the midst of the Lent. It is time for us to examine ourselves—our call and our mission. Where are we ; how far have we sojourned and with what mission? It requires courage to move away from the safe place into the narrow and suffering spots, but we certainly need a gradual detachment from all false ties.

The basis of the church is not the social or economic equality or mutual co-operation but it is the divine call. The Church is not the result of human efforts. God has made us into his people by calling us out of bondage, slavery and social oppression. He has been leading us out of desert to fertile ground, out of slavery to freedom and out of captivity to liberation. The church has been always moving. That's why it is called a 'pilgrim Church'. The temptation to settle in a comfortable oasis, however,

has often been too great to resist and frequently the divine call is forgotten and the unity broken. This requires a constant examination of anyone who drives the church into a safe shelter or a cosy clique and a constant encouragement to look forward to what is to come. We are perfected by our sufferings. Let the suffering of each day convert our illusions into the prayer of a contrite people. This prayer is the song of the suffering Church. Sometimes it seems as if the Church is so busy with its projects and plans that there is neither the time nor the mood to pray.

But when prayer is no longer its primary concern and when its many activities are no longer seen as experienced as part of prayer itself; the church quickly degenerates into a club with a common cause but no common vocation. Our song then will have many odd notes. Let us not forget that the prayer is the language of the Church and we cannot afford to be dumb for too long a period.

DASS BABU

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON MINISTRY

WHO GIVES THIS WOMAN...?

In the past few months I had to solemnize quite a few marriages. Whenever I am free I accept the invitations, for this is one way of participating in the joys of my people. Some take it as a 'status symbol' to get the Bishop solemnize the wedding! But others really rejoice that the Bishop is present at the weddings of the poor and the rich, whenever he is able to make it. In any case, my predecessor had established a good tradition that those who invite the Bishop to weddings contribute according to their capacity to a fund from which poor families are helped for marriage expenses. I have encouraged this and some committed families gave very liberally.

After conducting a few services, it occurred to me that this question 'Who gives this woman (away) to be married to this man?' sounds rather odd in a solemn service, particularly in Tamil and Malayalam. As if the bride is a property to be given away! In this Ecumenical Decade of Churches' Solidarity with Women, somehow this has to be changed, I felt. So I began to say 'would the father please come forward and help the bride and groom to hold their hands?'.

But then I realised, it is not fair that only the father comes forward to do this solemn act. After all, the daughter 'belongs' to the father and the mother! They both brought her up, they both will miss her when she leaves her home to join her husband's home. Father cannot claim any special rights. I explained this in one of the wedding services and with previous briefing, asked the father and the mother of the bride to come forward and help the couple to hold their hands. The first time there was some giggling in the service. The women were so happy, and the mother was so proud. Most people welcomed this small change.

But my wife pointed out to me that the participation of the groom's parents is also important. If the bride's parents, 'give her away', the groom's parents 'receive her into' their home. So after explaining this to them the parents of the bride and the groom were asked to come forward and help the couple to hold their hands. Symbolically it means, I explain, that no one is giving or receiving but the parents and relatives on both sides are committing themselves to support and pray for the couple as they grow together in mutual love and understanding. Indian marriages are not just uniting of two persons, but two families. The young couples need the prayers and support of the families as they set up their home. This has now become the common practice whenever I conduct weddings and some pastors also have started doing so.

If we believe that God made men and women in God's image and that they are equal and inter-dependent, it should reflect in our worship. The wedding service is a unique occasion for learning and teaching this fundamental conviction and change some of our traditional misunderstandings and wrong social practice. A small change in the wedding service, I believe, can be a significant witness to our Biblical understanding and theological convictions. Also to express some of the good values in our centre.

Moreover, worship, the main purpose of which is to glorify God, is as well a medium of theological education of the people of God.

SAM AMIRTHAM
Bishop



The Lord is Risen Indeed

RT. REV. DR. RYDER DEVAPRIAM, *Moderator*

The words of the Old Testament which bring out the whole secular spectrum of the presence of the loving God may be summed up in Jeremiah 33, 11. 'There shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord: Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! For I will restore the fortunes of land as at first, says the Lord!'

In the place of desolation there may be joy. In the meeting of a community of people living their lives, solving their problems, going about their business, there comes a time of desolation—In the loss of their fortunes, in the loss of their beloved ones, in the loss of power to manage their own affairs. The Old Testament longs for an assurance of continued prosperity contingent on obedience. Its obedience, however, is not devoid of faith as we see in St. Paul's analysis of the history of Israel. In Hebrews

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... and it goes on to say faith Abel... Enoch... Noah...

We have been reading in the Passion Week the lessons that prepare us at the feet of the Cross to lay within ourselves the steps that lead to perception of the Resurrection, the intimation of immortality. In our Biblical, Christian, and ecumenical heritage, we the members of the Church of South India say with the people of the Old Testament that 'the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will

fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.' (Jeremiah 33, 14).

Even though in those chapters 31 to 33 of the Book of Jeremiah which we read in the Passion Week the prophet is referring to a continually renewed prosperity for the people of God through wars and persecution and captivity which was visible and is a part of the collective memory of the people of God and therefore refers to the assurance of continued succession on the throne of David in a temporal, physical sense. The voice of God points to the enthronement of the righteousness of God (Jer. 33:15). This is what the Christian Church realised in the perception that they were living in the wonderful glow of the resurrected Jesus. Surprising one at dawn and awakening two by the roadside and wiping the tears of many saying their prayers behind closed doors and beckoning you and me on the shores of our own Galilees, the Lord is risen indeed.

'Now faith is the substance of the things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.'

Let the power of the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, work in our lives so that what we hope to obtain i.e. the eternal life whether it be continued prosperity and the assurance that the Church will remain strong here as we know it or whether it be the assurance of life beyond death let the Holy Spirit work, for it is only by that power of the Holy Spirit the Apostles could see the resurrected Jesus and the Church ever since has responded, yes He is risen indeed. And that is why the Church had said sometimes knowingly sometimes casually but always truly, I believe in the Holy Spirit... and the life of the world to come, Amen.



Proclaim the Good News

DR. MILAN OPOCENSKY, *Geneva*

The Gospel is the message that we have been set free, that God in Jesus Christ has done everything to break the chains which imprison us.

It proclaims what has happened and what is continually happening between heaven and earth, between God and us.

Jesus leaves the so-called Christian circles to walk through the world with outstretched arms and to look for his sheep by the hedges and on the fringe of human society.

His forceful 'Yes' to sinful people and to an erring world still resounds with power and life.

Jesus has taken all the weakness and sins, pain and suffering of humankind upon himself. He did not flee from this world or turn away from humankind. He stayed and conquered.

The joyful news that this broken and shattered world is not a place of condemnation but of victory and liberation can never resound loudly enough.

The Gospel does not beautify anything in the world.

The Gospel of the victory of the crucified lamb is joyful news that the curse has been removed from the world and the demonic powers destroyed. This message must be proclaimed with a loud voice and should make the church and all of its members free and joyful messengers of life.

The Gospel liberates us from being broken by what we have seen happening all around us.

History is not only a great teacher—it can also firmly hold us captive. The Gospel liberates us from this kind of captivity.

We know that God acts for human beings, that he intervenes in everyday human life, shapes human community and leads humankind to its final goal.

We cannot run away from either science or technology. We use them happily and gratefully. We take advantage of technical progress to increase our activities in mission, publication and evangelization. However, the Gospel reminds us of the ambiguous character of science and technology. Technical progress can be misused by tyrants and exploiters. In human hands science and technology can become the instruments of 'unfreedom' and hopelessness.

The Gospel liberates us from the oppressive awareness of sin and guilt.

Christ's presence sets us free from everything which causes our entanglement.

There is nothing more urgent than to pass on this good news.

Christ's presence turns our thoughts away from ourselves and liberates us from concentrating on ourselves.

The Gospel sets us free from the burden and chains of history.

The Gospel shakes the church. We are faced with the difficult and painful task of self-examination and self-liberation in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

True freedom in Jesus Christ shows us that the validity of many church structures and customs is limited in this territory and the result of circumstances.

The Gospel received anew opens our eyes to the people who were previously alien to us.

Faith and freedom (freedom in the Holy Spirit) only grow in a valiant, open struggle at the place and the time into which the Lord of life and death has placed us.

The Gospel sets us free from the past.

Our freedom implies freedom from chance and fate and also from the burden of the course of history.

We are placed in the midst of today's life and society into it as messengers of comfort and also as co-workers of love and sacrifice.

We must help people to attain the freedom and service of love which the people of today so badly need.

Freedom in the Holy Spirit is joy, kindness and peace in the midst of human confusion and strain. Here we are set free from the past, from old orders and habits, from interests and ways of living.

We have many different means at our disposal for spreading the Gospel which were unknown to previous generations.

Whatever is invented to overcome distances and lighten the burden of work can also serve the glory of the Lord.

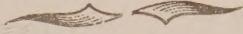
The Gospel is not changed by technology either. The slave working on the Egyptian pyramids needs the forgiveness of sins just as much as today's workers.

We must prepare ourselves still for more new inventions and dangers.

The Gospel is Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the one who came down and constantly comes down in his holy love to where we are wandering around in the midst of pain and sorrow, egoism and perplexity. He is the Lord of history, space, technology and progress and above all the Lord of our souls and hearts.

Repentance is the liberation of the human soul and the courage to make a new start..... it is liberation from self, from false self-satisfaction and false respect. Repentance is a genuine, joyful fellowship with sinners, outcastes and marginal people. Repentance is the awareness that people do not owe me anything but that I am in debt to all the people around me, that I am entitled to nothing.

There is nothing more urgent in the present situation than to battle through to the inner freedom of the faith.



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Gospel and Community

REV. DR. CHRISTOPHER L. FURTADO, *Mangalore**

I. The Quest for Community today

One of the distinct marks of our times, as we stand at the threshold of a new millennium, is the thirst for community, not only in our own country, but also in many parts of the world. The search for community is discernible in all major areas of human activity—political, social, economical, religious and cultural. Amidst people's struggles for freedom, justice and equality there is a keen sense of community and search for new forms of community life. Emergence of new nations recently in eastern Europe and of autonomous republics in the erstwhile Soviet Union are signs of the struggle for new forms of national community, based on ethnic, linguistic or religious identity and self-hood which had been so far suppressed by a particular political ideology, social system or cultural domination. In South Africa and in other similar situations attempts are going on to create a multiracial, multi-cultural, pluralist community, where so far certain minorities have exercised repression over majority groups. The situation in our country is similar, where the question of national unity and integration of diverse elements of culture, language, religion, caste and ideologies are of greatest importance to all of us.

The quest for a new and living community is however marked by forces of destruction. Everywhere humanity is threatened by divisions, arising out of narrow group loyalties, based on race, class, nationality or religion. In the name of national unity, certain groups in our country bring about disintegration by their religious fundamentalism or allegiance to group identities of castes, language or region, and destroy the delicate fabric of our common life, goals and aspirations as a nation. Instead of striving towards an inclusive community, where justice, peace and well-being will prevail for all sections of society, such communal forces try to impose their exclusive claims over against national interests, values and aspirations. Unfortunately communalism is spreading everywhere, not only among minority groups, but among larger communities, threatening to balkanize our country into linguistic, religious or ethnic entities. Today we are thus facing a situation where there is real thirst for genuine community in the midst of destructive forces of evil.

Where does the Church stand in this situation? What is its self-understanding and its role in the quest for true community? What image of community does it project to outsiders? Does the Indian Christian community

offer an answer to the search for national unity and grity? How does the unity of the Church relate to larger unity and integration of pluralist communities in India?

These are some of the questions that need to be raised while dealing with the theme, 'Gospel and Community'.

II. The Biblical vision of the one human community

The Bible witnesses to the universality of God's eternal purpose of the redemption of humanity, indeed the whole creation. God created the heavens and the earth and saw that it was good, because there was harmony, wholeness and integration of the whole created order. However, because of its estrangement from God, humanity strayed from its own destination, resulting in brokenness of life and alienation from fellow-human beings and from the whole of creation. (Resources for Sections, WCC, VII Assembly, Geneva 1990, p. 51). Yet God intends renewal and reconciliation for the whole creation, as witnessed by his covenant with Noah and with every living creature (Gen. 8 : 8-10). The Biblical vision of the fulfilment of God's plan and purpose is of a 'new heaven and new earth' (Rev. 21 : 1), where the whole of creation is reconciled to God. In that eschatological new Jerusalem the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of the glory of God is that city's light and the nations will walk by that light. The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and people will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations (Rev. 21 : 22-26).

A cursory reading of the O.T. might give us an impression that it is a record of the history of a particular people, the people of Israel and of God's dealing with them. But a careful survey of the whole O.T. story will show that the history of Israel is set within the framework of God's dealings with the whole of humanity. The object of God's redemption is the world of nations. Even in the particularistic actions of God, like election of Israel, there is an underlying motif of the universality of purpose. Israel, as a small segment of all humanity, was chosen for the sake of all the people of the earth. Israel was 'a light to the nations', 'servant of the Lord', to carry God's salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa. 49 : 6). When Israel forgot God, God chose her to be a sign and instrument for the gathering of the nations, and turned away from them in introversion, pride and self-righteousness, prophets like Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah had to condemn them for their ethnocentric arrogance and for subverting God's real purpose for humanity.

* This is one of the four-theme addresses delivered by Rev. C.L. Furtado, the Principal of the Karnataka Theological College, Mangalore.

The New Testament ecclesia too is the outcome of God's intervention into human affairs through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the outcome of Christ's proclamation of God's Kingdom on earth, His ministry, death and resurrection. It is the body of Christ, which continues the mission and ministry of Christ on earth as instrument, sign and foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God.

The first characteristic of the community of faith, the New Israel, which Christ constituted, was that it was formed out of the poor, the outcastes and the marginalized. By virtue of their calling by God, they who were once no people became the people of God, a chosen people, a royal priesthood and a holy nation, so that they might declare the mighty acts of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2 : 9-10).

The second quality of the N.T. community was that it was a gathered community. By his death Christ gathered the children of God into one (John 11 : 52). The new community that was constituted was drawn from many parts of the world (Acts 2).

Thirdly it was a reconciled and reconciling community (2 Cor. 5 : 18-19). God's eternal purpose of bringing all things in heaven and earth together in Christ, was being fulfilled in the Church, where the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile had been destroyed. Consequently there were no foreigners and aliens in the household of God, only fellow-citizens and members (Eph. 2 : 11, 14, 19).

Thus, the new community of faith is a 'Koinonia', which is not only constituted but also nurtured and empowered by the Holy Spirit, who enables the Church to serve and to strive towards the gathering of all people in the one new humanity in Christ. This 'Koinonia' transcends the social, ethnic, age and sex differences (Gal. 3 : 28). It is an inclusive fellowship and is a sign of the unity that God intends for all people.

Koinonia implies fellowship and sharing of life. The apostolic Church was a community of sharing, caring and serving (Acts 2 : 42-46). The common life of early Christians, their eucharistic fellowship and sharing of resources had a missionary dimension and thrust, in that many people were attracted and were added to them daily (Acts 2 : 47). The Church is called not only to preach but also to embody the gospel, by becoming a sign of sharing and caring and fostering fellowship and unity in a divided world.

The N.T. Church can thus be seen as being caught up by a vision of the unfolding purpose God for transformation of a divided and alienated humanity into a reconciled community, as the body of Christ and as first fruits of a new creation, participating in the actualization of the eschatological hope of a new heaven and a new earth.

III. Vision and reality

The Biblical vision of a new humanity, reconciled to God and reintegrated with God's creation, should motivate us to move forward and to make that vision a reality. If the Church is to be the sacrament of the new humanity, it has to understand itself primarily as a community rather than as an institution or organization. In recent times the Church is again attempting to discover its community nature and to find new models of life and witness, through

which to express it. This discovery of the Church's community dimension has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the Church in India and its mission :

1. The Indian Church lives in a pluralistic context of diverse ethnic, social, cultural and religious communities. Not only in India, but everywhere in the world and in all ages, this has been the normal pattern for the Church, except for the medieval Church in Europe. Plurality and diversity are characteristic of God's economy, in nature as well as races, cultures and religions. Plurality of religious and cultural traditions are not only a manifestation of the richness and diversity of humankind, it is also the result of God's dealing with peoples and nations (Resources for Sections, p. 70). The Church affirms that God has not left himself without a witness among the nations (Acts 14 : 17). His goodness and saving mercy were not confined to a particular region, cultural type or group of people. As Indian Christians we should be able to affirm that wisdom and holiness, love and devotion, peace and justice found in other religious traditions are of God and are gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore an attitude of self-sufficiency in our own religious tradition and claims to uniqueness for our own spiritual experience and an entirely negative and critical attitude to people of other communities are indicative of a kind of fundamentalism that is prevalent among us.

The Christian community cannot therefore make exclusive claims for itself and stand in isolation from other communities. Empowered and emboldened by the Holy Spirit, who leads us to all truth, we should be able to enter into living dialogue with people of other faiths and traditions, in order to build inclusive communities of common concerns and goals. Only then we can build a Koinonia which stretches beyond our own community, and seek to be a sign of the new human community.

2. Church's solidarity with the poor and marginalised. The Indian Church, especially the rural Christian communities, shares in the poverty and underdevelopment of the country. A general impression that our neighbours have of us is that of power and affluence, because of our properties, assets and institutions. The inflow of overseas aid also contributes to this kind of an impression. What D. T. Niles said several decades ago is perhaps more true today that the Christian community in India is a privileged minority, envied by others.

It is sad but true that the material resources of the Church are not always shared in the spirit of Koinonia. There is fighting and litigation for control and use of such resources. Sometimes our priorities are so lopsided that justice is not done to the poor and underprivileged.

This is especially true of the poor and the destitute who are outside the Christian community. To what extent do we share in the agony and desperation of the oppressed, stand in solidarity with them and extend the Koinonia of the Spirit to them ?

One important segment of the marginalised, both within the Church and in society is that of women. To what degree has the Christian community broken the wall of separation between the male and the female and overcome the age-old prejudices against them? Have we succeeded in giving them equal opportunity for participation in the life and ministry of the Church? The fullness of life which Christ offers should be shared in the new community of faith without distinction of sex, age, economic and social condition and disability. In fact such marginalized people are at the centre of God's promise in Christ of a new humanity. They are the people of God in a special way.

3. The unity of the Church is of special importance. Unity of the Church is integral to the unity of humankind. Church unity, though important, is only a small step in realization of the vision of the birth of a new human community. In the movement towards genuine reconciliation among all of God's people and creation, the visible unity among Christians has special meaning.

In the C.S.I. it has been possible to unite Christians of different ecclesiastical traditions and confessions. The Joint Council is a step forward in greater unity among Churches which should be encouraged and strengthened. However, unity among churches should also mean greater integration and cohesion of all elements of faith and tradition.

The existence of caste and class distinctions, and of regionalism and factionalism is a real challenge to unity and fellowship within the Church and stands in the way of its effective witness to the world. The alarming growth of sectarianism and fundamentalism within the Church also threatens the well-being and inclusive nature of the Christian Community.

The vision of unity however has to include people of other communities, because the church has been called to be a sign of the promise of the new community. May the Holy Spirit, who constitutes and empowers the Church, enable it to become an instrument in the realization and actualization of that vision of a new and living humanity.

Festival of Evangelism*

Ms. RUTH ANSTEY, London

To read any newspaper today, to watch any T.V. news bulletin, is to realise how desperately good news needed.

And at a personal level, when someone dear to us is sick or dies or we ourselves become ill, lose our job, or get into debt, how we long for at least some good news.

The heart of Christian teaching is that there is good news. Really? For if we Christians truly believe this and act accordingly, why isn't everyone queuing up to hear it?!

The remarkable thing is that our Lord Jesus Christ who spoke of good news, did not have an easy life at all. Yet His command to His followers to proclaim the good news was after He had undergone suffering and rejection, after He knew the problems and temptations for Himself and others, of living in this world. And this command was so important to Him that it was almost the last thing He said to His disciples before He left them.

So sharing good news is not to do with having an easy life.

In 1992 we are near the beginning of the decade of evangelism.

In England, there hasn't been much progress. No doubt there are many reasons.

For a long time, British Christians thought that missionary work was something we did overseas—in India, China, Africa. England was a Christian country. We already had the good news. Now we know that many in Britain are not Christian believers. They belong to another faith, or are agnostic, or openly say that they do not believe in any God—certainly not in a God who is good.

And we who are Christians—well, it is one thing to support evangelism among Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists overseas. It is quite another to preach the Gospel to an Indian or Chinese or Malaysian family living next door!

Many of our people are lapsed Christians. Perhaps they had some teaching in Sunday School when they were children. They are still quite happy that our Queen is crowned in a Christian cathedral, and that every day our Parliament opens with Christian prayers. But I don't

think they feel that the Person of Christ actually impinges on their lives. Among those who say there is no God are some intelligent and good-living people who would simply, if sadly, say that to believe in any transcendental power is dishonest in today's technological age, —a throwback to an era when through our ignorance it seemed natural to assume some external force in control.

Yes, there are some very faithful, some victorious Christians. Yes, quite a lot of people who wish they could believe. Yes, traditional and new forms of evangelism are tried. But if we measure Christian believers even by the percentage of the population which attends church, it is very small, and in many churches, though not all, e.g., some black churches, is declining.

I am sad to share this with you, though many of you know it. Even if some of you may not agree with me in all respects, I do not think anyone could give a rosy picture of our spiritual health in Britain today, whether of our success in evangelism or of our confidence as a Christian community.

You will at least appreciate the strong sense of contrast I felt when I received very recently a letter from an Indian friend in Madras. I quote part of it: 'A year has very quickly passed and the world has witnessed many unbelievable events—Gulf War, destruction of Soviet Communism, devastating floods and cyclone in China, Bangladesh, Philippines, etc. In the midst of all this, the message of Christ is the answer. Government cannot solve all the human problems. But prayer cells are active everywhere. Both established church and sectarian groups are very active. All-night prayer fellowships are functioning in almost all churches and other groups. Non-Christians are eager to hear the message and there are quite a number of baptisms every month.'

Could this be true? Well, when I arrived in Madras last week, I heard also about the great human Christmas tree celebration in December at a vast open-air meeting attended by Christians and others in their thousands. And now in Tirunelveli I hear and see and feel so much of the same spirit of confidence and vitality. As for last night—that was a veritable Festival of Evangelism!

So it is hard for me who came to South India as a missionary from a country with a tremendous Christian history and heritage, not to feel that I shall be returning to a country which is now one of the hardest mission fields in the world! How to proclaim the good news there?!

I don't know all the answers. I shall make a few suggestions.

* Address delivered at the Festival of Evangelism, celebrated during the Synod sessions at Palayamkottai

1. The command of Christ stands. 'Go to all the world, proclaim the gospel' was not conditional or for certain times only.

2. God's time-scale may not be ours. We in Britain have been used wonderfully as senders of good news. Perhaps now He is pushing us more than we have appreciated to seek and learn from others' experience, to realise we need others' help. We are not self-sufficient. Can we accept a period of waiting, listening and learning? After all, God waited many centuries before He sent His son to earth at all.

3. Yet God can do great things even in difficult times. What about the experience of China? In the 1980s, after public worship had been suppressed for many years and open street evangelism was still forbidden, it was found that the Church had grown greatly through the years of persecution. The fall of the Iron Curtain in U.S.S.R., and the consequent re-opening of many churches there, seems to demonstrate the same thing. Nearer home: Bishop Ambalavanar told me this week, when I commented on the great difficulties affecting church life in Jaffna, 'In spite of all our troubles, the Church is growing.'

4. No Church or individual Christian need wait until they are perfect before proclaiming the good news. God can use and turn to His glory even unworthy human motives and tragic situations.

We all know the story of the prodigal son. Why did the son return to his father? Simply out of despair at having no food, clothes or shelter. But his father accepted him. I cherish the thought that perhaps later, having opened his heart to receive his father's love, the son left home again,—but this time to share some of that love with others.

And a very down-to-earth example from Church history. When heathen hordes were entering the area which much later was to become the U.S.S.R. and were ready to settle and begin to develop a more stable way of life, their leaders were discussing what religion to adopt. The choice was between Christianity and Islam. One of the factors said to determine their choice of Christianity was that Islam forbade alcohol and Christianity did not! Yet out of this choice grew the great Russian Orthodox Church. God can purify unworthy motives, though the way is sometimes hard.

Last night we saw an outstanding example of how God uses a tragic situation. As an English person, I could not help being touched that it was an English soldier whose action was eventually to lead Clarinda to Christ. These were the early days of a long-term Indo-British encounter. It came about and continued not always for commendable reasons, or in worthy ways. Yet God has used it. I must be one of very many who can testify to its mutual enrichment, and for Christians in fruitful partnership between churches, as well as in close personal relationships.

5. Our God is an imaginative and sensitive God. He knows that different situations call for different methods, and wants us, too, to be sensitive to the appropriate response at the right time.

I remember some ten years ago being taken by the former bishop of this diocese, Bishop Daniel Abraham, to visit some places in the diocese. One day when we were travelling, he said, 'Stop the car', and, to me, 'Look around you.' The open, level countryside was dotted with palmyra trees. The horizon all the way round was

visible, and at intervals a few buildings pierced the sky. They were all Church spires or towers! What a situation it was, in a land where Christians are a minority, to see this part of God's creation claimed for Christ! Those who built cathedrals in Britain and Europe were all seeking to witness to the lordship of Christ, and did magnificently. Yet a few years ago, I heard of a congregation which had long planned to build a church and save long and hard to do so, deciding almost at the last moment not to do so. They gave the money for a construction plan for the poor and homeless. Surely, that decision too, was no less for the glory of God.

Equally, there are times in our evangelism to speak and times to be silent. I remember, some years ago, being introduced by a Christian friend to a new neighbour someone who had been a missionary in India. I shall never forget the horrified look on the new neighbour's face. Here, she felt, was someone from a different world with whom she could have nothing in common. It was a long time before I could form a relationship with her.

6. So how do we decide when to speak and when to be silent, when to give, when to be ready to receive, when to witness in one way or another? The only possible answer can be to look unto Jesus, keep close to Him, be open to His word for us.

The magic and the mystery of Jesus is that He attracts people to Him. He did go out to preach and to teach. But people always wanted to listen, even if they disagreed with what He said. He revealed paradoxes: suffering and yet living life abundantly; fully human yet divine; free yet living in a conquered country; fulfilled yet having no ordinary family life; God-centred yet living in a real world. There was no division between His faith and His life. He was always Himself and always open to His father and to others.

This secret, which brought people to Him in Palestine, which meant that after He left this world His message remained, was carried on, and will survive in spite of all our human failings, is one that we can share, if and only if, we do live close to Him.

I rejoice in the wonderful opportunities in South India at this time. You have greatly encouraged and warmed the hearts of all of us. Nor do we think that everything is easy for you. Please go on from strength to strength. But also remember and pray for: Christians in Western Europe; witness in lands where no citizen is allowed by law to be baptised as a Christian, and in churches built; countries where Christians need to be wise as serpents, harmless as doves.

The last service I attended in London before I left last week was a Covenant Service (which also has a place in the C.S.I. Book of Common Worship). I concluded using one prayer from that service.

'Christ has many services to be done; some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and temporal interests, others are contrary to both. In some we may please Christ and please ourselves, in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do all these things is assuredly given us in Christ, who strengtheneth us.'

'Let us all engage our hearts to the Lord, and resolve in His strength, never to go back.'

Christian Concern in Dialogue

K. C. ABRAHAM,* Bangalore

I. Why is dialogue important?

(a) Dialogue is indispensable in a situation of plurality. In daily life—whether in the office, in the neighbourhood or in the market place—we live and work side by side with people of other faiths. Our life is bound up with others who profess religious beliefs and cultural traits that are different from those of ours. Dialogue in this situation takes place at many levels almost always spontaneously.

(b) Life-threatening situations in the present-day world demand co-operative effort from all religions to meet them. Religion and communal clashes abound in this country and divide us. Violence committed in the name of religion seriously endangers the tenuous fabric of our corporate life.

Problems created by economic injustice are also a common concern. Hunger and poverty are the lot of millions. And they affect all regardless of their religious affiliations. How can we alleviate them? Can we muster enough spiritual resources to bring about a just and non-exploitative order?

There is also the crisis in our environment. The pollution of water, land and air has reached catastrophic proportions. The life of the species is threatened. Green house effect and the pressures on ozone layer and their impact on our life is widely recognized now. We also know that religious faiths influence human attitude to nature. Can we mobilize the resources available in the religions to prevent further ecological disasters?

(c) Religion still is a vital force. There was a time many thought that religion would disappear with economic progress. Today there is a crisis of the political ideologies that were constructed on anti-religious philosophies. Certainly there is a lot of distortion and oppressive elements in the institution of religion. But there is in it a liberative value orientation. And the need of the hour is to strengthen the liberative strands within all religions for human well-being.

II. Basic affirmations that influence dialogue

(a) Plurality and differences are God's gift and integral to the structure of God's creation. Differences should not

divide us. They enhance the beauty and harmony of our life. There are different ways of apprehending truth.

(b) The centre of our faith is a mystery we know only partially. As St. Paul says we know in part. Christ is ultimate for Christians. But the way we understand the meaning and interpret it are influenced by different cultural and social backgrounds. We see this difference in the interpretation of Jesus even in the New Testament. When Matthew was speaking to the Jewish readers, he was trying to interpret the meaning of Christ in a way that can be understood by them. We read St. John's Gospel. Even the beginning itself is influenced by philosophy. Certainly he was addressing people who are influenced by Greek thinking. He has to use 'logos' and other Greek terminology. We also need to apprehend Christ in our own way. The blacks, feminists and dalits today make an effort to understand and interpret Christ in terms of their own context—as one who liberates them from the bondage that are specific to their condition.

Many may agree to this. But still they want to ask what about God's revelation in other religions? I brought to your attention the difference in our perceptions of Christ reality to draw a parallel between this and the difference in our apprehension of the meaning of ultimate mystery. The way a Hindu or a Muslim experiences and lives out his or her faith in God is different from ours. But they are not false or wrong. It is their response to the ultimate reality. We sympathetically listen to it and understand it. Certainly we can raise questions to it; provided we are willing to be questioned by them. Our ultimate commitment to Christ does not mean we have to condemn all others who worship and believe in God differently.

(c) The dialogue is not a way of obliterating all differences in religion. In fact the theory 'all religions are equal' is a false doctrine. We need to respect the differences. They are different responses to the mystery of God. And we should know and appreciate the peculiar strength of each response and be enriched by it. For example, when we meet the challenges of ecology we now take seriously the Hindu view or the view of primal/tribal religions to nature. They can help us rediscover the long-forgotten emphasis in our Christian faith. Christ is cosmic Christ. Our understanding of Christ is deepened. We are not advocating in dialogue a watered-down Christology. But it is, if rightly understood, an opportunity to broaden our understanding of Christ reality. Sometimes we appear to be defenders of Christ as if Christ needs some people to protect him! But as the title of one of the books of M. M. Thomas suggests we have to 'risk Christ for Christ's sake'.

* Dr. K. C. Abraham is the Director of the South Asia Theological Research Institute (SATHRI) of the Senate of Serampore College. These notes are based on his talk.

III. Ways of Dialogue

(a) An attitude of humility and openness is the starting point for a genuine dialogue. We have no business to condemn other religions. We need to listen to the other and be willing to learn from others. That will only enhance our God experience.

(b) Dialogue in action: In solving the problems of poverty, communalism, environmental destruction and others, all religions should unite. There is nothing like Christian hunger or Hindu hunger. The hungry has to be fed. To protect our environment is a task in which we all join together. If we want to plant more trees or clean the area in which we live, should we not ask all people to join together, in them?

(c) Sharing our spiritual heritage: in some Catholic groups special programmes are organized in which families from different religions live together for a period of one week or more. People who have participated in it found this to be of an extraordinary experience. They share

their vision of life and their perceptions of spirituality. They even share their prayers. Bhakti Bhajans in Hindu religion are extremely meaningful. Sometimes they evoke a feeling of oneness with the Divine in a way better than some of the English hymns sung in our languages. We should also explore the meaning of rich symbols which we use in our festivals and in our worship. How many of us know the significance of some of the Hindu marriage rites and funeral rites?

(d) Dialogue as mission: A question is often asked: Is mission unnecessary when dialogue is practised? Yes, we are asking a new way of understanding and doing of mission. Mission is still important. In fact, if we do not have a mission we have no right to exist as a church. But our mission is not an aggressive crusade directed to condemning all religions and enlisting everyone to the church. We are committed to sharing through our lives and action God's liberating and transforming presence in the world. When we participate with people of other faiths in love and mutual trust there is plenty of opportunities to share the source of our inspiration for our life—Christ the giver of new life.



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Missionary Congregation in the Indian Context

(WCC—CCA—NCCI JOINT CONSULTATION)

Invited by the National Council of Churches in India 45 participants from all over India delegated representatives from 18 of the 27 member churches of the NCCI and some directly invited resource persons together with one delegate of the National Council of Churches in Myanmar and one staff member each of CCA and WCC met at Nagpur October 21-26, 1991 at a consultation jointly sponsored by the NCCI, CCA and WCC on

‘Missionary Congregations in the Indian Context.’

It was shaped by the high quality of its plenary presentations, Bible studies and case studies, yet even more by the very lively discussions in which all participated. The following report about the content and direction of the discussion during this consultation is based on the reports of the reflectors of the three discussion groups and notes taken during the various plenary discussions.

‘... in the Indian Context’

The key-note address as well as the presentation on the Indian context and its challenges for mission in India today set the frame for related discussions. Two major factors were primarily dealt with in the discussions—the multi-religious nature of the Indian society and the prevailing feature of socio-economic inequalities. The appeal ‘to make a subjective acceptance of the word syncretism’ was partly accepted towards a ‘Christ-centred syncretism’ by some and a ‘God-centred syncretism’ by others. The concern for a humbler attitude of Christians towards people of other faiths was widely shared as was the concern for a more thorough encounter between the Gospel and the Indian culture (referring to the thesis of Richard Niebuhr ‘Christ Transforming Culture’). Yet, given the multiplicity of cultures : to which to refer?

We have also to distinguish between a dominant culture (which promotes a value-system in the interest of the ruling sectors of society) and a folk-culture opposed to the dominant culture.

Within the multi-religious reality of India, recent tendencies of religious fundamentalism were discussed. Yet it was stated that these are not typical for the whole of Indian society. One group discussed at length discriminations against Christians in some parts of India. The concept of a secular state is being gradually undermined, some observed. Being a minority, Christians find it difficult to take responsibility for the whole nation. On the other hand it was bluntly said : ‘We are not involved

in national politics because we are too much busy with Church politics’.

With regard to the socio-economic inequalities inherent in the Indian society (rich and poor) urban and rural; educated and illiterate; men and women; high, low and no-caste people, all agreed that these need to be tackled within the church first. Not few Indians are ready to accept Christ but find reasons to refuse the church.

Participation in God’s mission

The participants of the consultation did not find it difficult to affirm repeatedly that mission is and remains God’s mission and that we are called to be co-workers with God. God is a sending God, sending his son to promote his work to reconcile humanity with himself and to renew the whole creation. Jesus Christ addresses his disciples : ‘As the father has sent me so I send you’ (John 20, 21). Our role, the role of all local Christian communities, is the role of co-workers of Christ participating in God’s plan to unite all things in Christ (Eph. 1, 9-10).

This has several implications for us :

- We do not need to be worried that we can only do small things and reach modest changes. We can trust that God is using them according to his plan.
- We are not the only co-workers of God. Since it is his mission he may choose his instruments even amongst people of other faiths. One group discussed at length the question how far we could acknowledge Gandhi having been a special instrument of God.
- Since we are anyway not the only instrument of God we should be free to search for partners or allies to participate in God’s mission in our locality— allies also outside the church. Mission does not only mean to be for others, it also means to be with others.
- To participate in God’s mission means to communicate God’s love to all people as well as to apply God’s promises towards a new heaven where justice and peace prevail to the present living conditions of all people. Christian communities are expected to stand with their very life for the trustworthiness of God’s promise.

Mission in Christ's Way

The first Bible study of the consultation on Isaiah 42 opened a discussion in plenary and in group on the implications of the concept of the 'Suffering Servant of God' for the role of Christian and churches in mission in the Indian society. Referring to the Hindu religious tenet of *karma* we have to be very careful in emphasizing suffering as a positive concept, it was repeatedly said. We have to avoid any connotation towards a passive acceptance and endurance of injustice and oppression. But the suffering of the suffering servant of God is an active form of suffering. His task is to bring justice, to end the suffering of the downtrodden. Yet he is bound to fulfill his task in practising love that makes himself vulnerable. He 'will not speak aloud' and that might be mistaken as weakness, but it is not.

This attitude of the suffering servant of God, the attitude of the Christ to other people should set the basic criterion for our attitude to other people. It should help us

- to overcome all attitude of superiority in our mission work as if we were better than others or givers only whilst others would be receivers only. 'We are not allowed to address others in a position of superiority', one group stated.
- To cleanse our language from terms that offend others : 'Good news can become bad news when the preacher degrades and humiliates those to whom he wants to communicate the Gospel', it was said. One group even discussed the need to correct liturgical texts for instance on Good Friday with regard to the Jews.
- To share with open heart and without fear the joys and sorrows of our neighbours of other faiths.
- For dalits : Not to hide any longer their family names but rather affirm their identity even if 'one is ashamed of it'.

Need for repentance and transformation

In his key-note address Dr. Mathai Zachariah had stated that the crisis of mission in India is not methodological, it is spiritual, cultural and theological. When the participants discussed the role of their own local congregations and tried to learn how these their local communities can become better partners in God's mission they confirmed this analysis. They did not discuss so much methodological questions but rather emphasized the general need for repentance and real transformation that would allow the local churches to become 'living letters of God's love'. This need for repentance and transformation was unfolded mainly towards three areas :

- (1) Structural injustice within the church.
- (2) Lack of stewardship of resources.
- (3) Lack of interest for what happens outside the church.

(1) Towards the end of the consultation three 'sectoral inputs'—on Dalits, women and youth—summarised what the whole consultation had dedicated to wide parts of its discussion time : How to

overcome structural injustice within the church as a precondition for enabling us to address the same injustice in society at large ?

Many examples for ongoing or sometimes new discriminating separations between groups of different caste-backgrounds within local churches were told. One participant described her local congregation being divided into two parts having two separate church buildings although being part of the same denomination and being in principle one congregation. 'We cannot even eat together !', it was complained, whilst representatives from tribal churches in Chotanagpur or in North-East India emphasized that they do not have such problems, this form of structural sin within the church seems to be a major challenge for transformation of many Indian churches in North and South.

The fact that through the nominations from the churches only four of the participants were women reflected from the beginning another structural injustice ; the lack of women's participation on all decision-making levels of the Indian churches. The participants widely compared the status of women in their churches and they could observe some substantial differences. Yet there is no church in India that could claim having provided equal chances and rights for women and men at all levels. Various ways to correct this by constitutional provisions and educational efforts were discussed.

Last but not the least the role of young people in the churches was discussed. In many churches young people feel oppressed or at least marginalised and excluded from real active participation. 'In our church we observe that the youth is leaving the church. How is it with yours ?' one participant asked. Other participants assessed critically too high age limitations in their church constitutions with regard to the right to vote or to be elected.

The renewal and transformation needed with regard to those structural injustices should start at local levels, it was repeatedly said. Only then we can hope that renewal will take place. Programmes like that of the Church of South India's 'Vision to Equip Local Congregations for Mission' (VELCOME) encourage local congregations to take initiatives to cope with the agenda of their community in a common effort where the gifts and contributions of all are needed and used. Suggesting a common festive meal as a beginning of such action-oriented gatherings indicates how much the possibility of eating together is a precondition for real fellowship.

- (2) The Indian churches together are one of the largest (single land-owners in India, it was said. The way the Indian churches use their property speaks to the Indian society at large ; what message can be heard ? Many participants stressed the need for a higher degree of financial self-support. The ongoing dependency on foreign money reflects a spiritual weakness. 'At least for the normal running of the ministry of the church we should become self-supporting', one church leader stated. Only special projects should be dependent on foreign support. Whilst there are some churches in India which have reached this goal already, others have not yet. Other participants underlined the stewardship of resources of the local level. Some example from the

realisation of the VELCOM-programme in the CSI showed how local congregations are able to release resources unexpected by the leadership of the church, provided they could agree as a community to focus all their resources on a certain project to improve the living conditions of all in their village of locality.

(3) One participant describing the reality of some congregations of his church, self-critically observed: 'We are not interested in what is happening around us, it does not matter because it is not our problem. We live in a closed community.' To live in a closed community is a contradiction to our call to participate in God's mission, the participants agreed. A missionary congregation is first of all an open congregation, interested in everything that matters for the life or even survival of all members of the wider local community. The 'Five-Point Programme' (education, health, agriculture and other professions, financial management and self-reliance, spiritual ministry) of the Gossner-Evangelical-Lutheran Church was seen as inspiring example as to how to deal with the agenda of whole local communities and to do mission in a 'comprehensive approach'. The report from this church clearly showed that this wholistic approach does not neglect the proclamation of the Gospel at all, a remarkable growth of the congregations is part of the story.

Steps to be taken

The participants travelled home with a set of good intentions in their luggage.

Some are determined to do their best to arrange exchange visits or even visitations between different churches in India. They hope that such mutual visitations crossing denominational and regional borders would promote a process of mutual conscientisation with regard to the necessary transformation—especially to overcome injustices within the churches. The NCCI has been asked help in arranging such visits.

Others declared that they see valuable insights in the various presented case studies from the Church of South India, the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in North-East India, the Church of North India and the Gossner Evangelical-Lutheran Church—insights they would like to take up in their own churches.

In all case studies the role of pastors and other local leaders is mainly seen as a catalysing one. Some stated at the present way of theological training does not prepare pastors for such a role and for a responsibility for society at large neither. So they call for a reform of theological education in India.

Missionary Congregations?

From the beginning of the consultation some were not happy with the term 'missionary congregations'. The word 'missionary' they said, is a too much loaded one. They came back to this question in the end of the consultation and said: The adequate theme of our consultation would rather have been

'renewed congregations in mission' or
'towards new communities in mission'.

However, what matters is the answer our own congregation would give to the critical question: 'Is it a community people can rely on?'

The following is the statement approved by the participants at the end:

STATEMENT

We, the participants of the Consultation on 'Missionary Congregations in the Indian Context' rejoice in coming together to affirm that God called us to participate in his mission to fulfil the promise of renewal of his whole creation in the context of religious pluralism, socio-economic and gender inequalities, ecological imbalances, authoritarianism and repression.

Having examined the context in which churches engaged themselves in mission in the light of the Bible studies, case-studies presentations and the group discussions, we bring this message and recommendations to our churches for their consideration and implementation.

Equipping congregations for God's mission being the focus of the Consultation, we state that:

1. The work of the Suffering Servant as portrayed in the Book of Prophet Isaiah and realized in the life of Jesus Christ as himself becoming one among the suffering but not being a passive sufferer has to be understood in relation to our attitude to the oppressed and struggling communities in India today.

2. The participation of congregations in decision-making spheres like electoral process in politics which affect people has to be encouraged.

3. God's mission demands the involvement of the congregation in the ministry of reconciliation and healing, in promoting communal harmony and peaceful co-existence.

4. The dynamics of the 'Vision for Equipping the Local Congregations in Mission' (VELCOM of the Church of South India) enable the local congregations to become caring, sharing, serving and praying communities. It can be one of the models of doing mission. The Five Point Programme of the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church and the other case studies also provide further models for equipping congregations in mission.

5. We confess that the prevalence of caste discrimination, suppression of *Dalits* and tribal communities, oppression of women and youth in our congregations is a hindrance and contradiction to God's mission. Therefore we urge the congregations to break these unjust structures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Exchange visits, resource development and sharing among churches and live-in situations at various levels be promoted for fostering fellowship, common learning and understanding of various cultural and theological traditions and for mutual inspiration and enrichment.

2. Facilitating the participation of women in decision-making processes has to be encouraged and their mandatory representation in all committees and councils should

be provided for. Recognizing their talents and gifts in congregations, they should be given equal opportunities such as voting rights and ordination.

3. The youth in the congregations be encouraged to take part in competitions of writing, painting, drama, music and indigenous art forms on the themes that strengthen bonds of being together in and doing together God's mission. The voting rights and mandatory repre-

sentation of the youth in all committees and coun-

4. Celebrations with *Agape* (love feast) be introduced at local levels inviting people of other faiths. A Sun-

to be instituted for the celebrations.

5. We propose that studies on renewing communi-

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